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GOVERNMENT RESTRAINT: AN ISSUE OF THE EIGHTIES



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GOVERNMENT RESTRAINT: AN ISSUE OF THE EIGHTIES

ISSUE DEFINITION

The 1980s have seen growing concerns in Canada about negative impacts, both economic and social, of the massive state bureaucracy which developed in response to economic depression, world war and the rising expectations of the post-war era. Since the mid seventies, concerns about the scope and expense of government programs and, in particular, about the size and cost of the modern public service, have spawned a series of initiatives directed to the enhancement of political control and the achievement of financial restraint. After examining salient characteristics of the issue of big government, this CIR reviews governmental efforts since 1984 to achieve reductions in the size and cost of the bureaucracy. Particular attention is given to the most ambitious and innovative of these attempts: the Nielsen Task Force.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

A. Sources of Concern

While the sources of public concern about the size and costs of modern government are too numerous and complex for full treatment in this review, they provide an indispensable context for the examination of government restraint initiatives provided below. Concerns about the growth of government are based, in part, on the facts of growth. From employing only a few thousand public servants during the years immediately following Confederation, the federal government had come to employ 116,000 by the end of World War II. At this point the modern era of growth commenced.

Federal public servants (excluding military personnel) numbered 202,000 by 1964, 300,000 by 1974, and 460,000 as of 1984. Growth in the size of the public service was, furthermore, dwarfed by growth in the scope of programs and scale of government spending. Following World War II, spending did not decline to pre-war levels, but instead rose from \$5.1 billion in 1945-6 to \$8.1 billion in 1964-5, \$29.2 billion in 1974-5 and \$101 billion in 1984-5.

Increases in the size of government do not, however, explain why by the 1980s government had widely come to be viewed as excessively big. Among the reasons for disillusionment, despite unprecedented levels of government service, the following can be cited. The relatively high levels of governmental intervention in the economy characteristic of the post-war era have inevitably led to government's receiving the blame for bad times, as problems of stagnation and inflation of the mid-seventies culminated in the early eighties in recession, and continuing high unemployment. During the seventies, also, the Watergate incident south of the border combined with publicity in Canada concerning RCMP wrongdoings and governmental scandals of the previous decade to raise doubts about the trustworthiness of government.

The growth of government has fostered the development of increasingly formalized systems of control and accountability as well as the enhancement of both the mandate and public profile of the Auditor General. While these developments were not accompanied by any discernible decrease in governmental growth or spending, they did supply the media and the public with detailed information about the incidence of governmental waste and inefficiency.

It is probable, also, that heightened media attention to events such as the Auditor General's Annual report to Parliament reflects an expanded public appetite for stories of bureaucratic self-indulgence. As the recession of 1981 created a widening group of Canadians personally affected by cutbacks and bankruptcies in the private sector, allusions in the media to indolence, waste, and inflated salaries in the public sector created a focus of resentment for economic victims.

Public resentment of the bureaucracy may also have resulted from changes in the attitude and behaviour of bureaucrats, as increasingly

impersonal organizations fostered an ethic of entrepreneurial careerism at the senior level, while resulting in declining levels of service (notably the perennial work stoppages at the Post Office) at working levels.

During the seventies and early eighties burgeoning governmental deficits led to growing public apprehensiveness about the costs of government, and were of immediate concern to elected politicians increasingly subject to budgetary constraints. After alternating between periods of modest annual deficit and surplus until and including 1974, the federal government sustained a deficit of \$3.8 billion in 1975. The annual deficit rose to \$10.7 billion by 1980 and, in February of 1984, was projected at \$29.6 billion for 1984-5. By the time the Conservatives had assumed power in the fall this projection had been revised to \$34.5 billion. Increasingly, the deficit added the spur of practical necessity to other inducements to restraint.

A final factor which would significantly affect the approach to restraint taken by the new government was concern that the bureaucracy had become so massive and unwieldy as to defy meaningful control, let alone restraint, even by a determined government. This concern had been expressed in dramatic form in 1976 when the Auditor General had asserted in his annual report that "the Government has lost, or is close to losing effective control of the public purse." Grounds for concern were clearly provided two years later when, responding to the Prime Minister's request for spending cuts of \$2.5 million, the government's central agency of restraint, Treasury Board, became bogged down in adversarial relationships with departments, so that ultimately cuts were made on an ad hoc basis by Mr. Trudeau's advisors. Grounds for concern multiplied as the effects of the most ambitious recent systemic control innovation - the Policy and Expenditure Management System of 1979 - became apparent. While affecting government spending only "at the margins" (in the words of one expert), the system fostered the creation of new central agencies and, at the least, proved entirely compatible with rates of growth in the central control bureaucracies which substantially exceeded those in the traditional bureaucracy. By the mid-eighties, as a result, advocates of restraint had come to experience a degree of disillusionment with a phenomenon seemingly

necessitated by big government: the reliance on bureaucracies to control the bureaucracy.

B. The Mulroney Government of 1984

It has been seen above that a cluster of factors converged in 1984 to make the need for governmental restraint a major political issue. The general issue of restraint had, furthermore, come to be defined in terms of a series of more specific concerns. Notable among these were concerns about the deficit and the widespread conviction that the public service had become a bloated and self-indulgent burden upon the hard pressed tax-payer.

While election results are the product of many factors, there can be little doubt that the strong pre-election commitment of the Progressive Conservatives to fiscal restraint and the moderation of bureaucratic growth provides one important explanation of the massive Conservative electoral sweep of September 1984. The question facing the government as it assumed power was, however, whether even a determined government could combat the inherent problems of bureaucratic control which the experience of the seventies had highlighted and, if so, how. A subsidiary problem, given the taste of recipients for existing services, was how far a politically astute government could afford to translate the rhetoric of restraint into actual service reductions.

It became clear, during the early weeks in the life of the new government, that there would be no massive distribution of "pink slips and running shoes" to senior bureaucrats, nor any wholesale and immediate assault on the ranks of less senior officials. Instead, two processes were set in motion which were to establish incremental restraint as a continuing priority on the agenda of the new government. These processes involved: (1) a task force mandated to undertake a fundamental review of government programs; and (2) a ministerial program review to provide a basis for immediate budgetary restraint measures.

1. The Nielsen Task Force

On 18 September 1984, just one day after the new government was sworn in, Prime Minister Mulroney announced the creation of a task force headed by Deputy Prime Minister Erik Nielsen and mandated to conduct a wide-ranging review of governmental programs with the aim of producing "a profile of government programs in each department which is simpler, more understandable and more accessible to their clientele." A particularly innovative feature of the task force was its extensive inclusion of private sector representatives on the teams established to review sectoral groups of programs. Ultimately, 102 business executives, labour leaders and professionals became full-time study team volunteers for periods of approximately three months, serving with the 20 provincial government officials and 99 federal public servants seconded to the task force.

The program review got underway late in 1984 with the creation of teams to review five priority areas: services and subsidies to business; job creation and training programs; agriculture; Indian and native programs; and the management of the government's estimated \$60 billion worth of property. During 1985, 14 additional studies were launched, with completion of the full range being attained by the end of the year. As the results of these studies became available, beginning in the summer and fall of 1985, a series of program and person-year cutback announcements were made by the government, in conformity with restraint measures contained in budgetary announcements beginning with that of November 1984. An initial function of the task force view was thus to provide a basis, separate from advice given by the bureaucracy, for the implementation of budgetary restraint measures described below.

2. Budgetary Restraint (September 1984 - February 1986)

During its initial weeks in power the Conservative government carried out a ministerial review of departmental programs in order to identify areas for immediate restraint. The time frame involved in the review precluded its being influenced by the more fundamental review of the Nielsen Task Force. Also, while permitting the government to act on

established commitments such as the disbanding of the Canadian Unity Information Office, the time-frame of the ministerial review made the exercise heavily dependent on restraint proposals generated by the bureaucracy.

a. The Economic Statement and Its Impacts

Results of the ministerial review were reflected in spending cuts and revenue-raising measures announced in the Economic Statement presented by Finance Minister Wilson to the House on 8 November 1984. It was subsequently announced by Treasury Board President Robert de Cotret that the spending cuts announced in the Economic Statement would ultimately result in the elimination of 3,600 positions (in both departments and Crown corporations). Subsequent managerial estimates suggested, however, that the real impact of scheduled cuts would be to restrain bureaucratic growth rather than to achieve reductions in its current size or cost. It was estimated by managers in the departments affected that most incumbents in terminated positions would be re-absorbed by their departments, or elsewhere in the bureaucracy, and that the number of people actually laid off would be less than 200.

b. The May 1985 Budget and the 1985-86 Estimates

The first formal budget of the new government, on 23 May 1985, carried forward the thrust of the Economic Statement with a series of proposals for further restraint measures, this time directed to achieving actual reductions in the size of the public service. It was announced that the government would reduce total Treasury Board controlled person-years by 2% in 1986-1987 and by 1% in each of the four following years. This, it was claimed, would reduce the number of federally employed public servants by 15,000 as of 1990-91, and would achieve savings of \$150 million in 1986-87 alone (a 1.6% reduction of the current salary costs of approximately \$9 billion).

The 1985-86 Main Estimates, tabled in the House on 26 February 1985, revealed the distribution of person-year reductions announced in the November 1984 Economic Statement. Major reductions, by

department, were: 607 (Employment and Immigration); 1,322 (Environment); 317 (Ministry of State for Economic Development, which was disbanded); and 233 (Public Works). Growth elsewhere in the system offset these reductions, however, resulting in a net increase in person-years for the federal public service of 1,209.

c. The February 1986 Budget and the 1986-87 Estimates

While it shifted the major emphasis of deficit reduction from expenditure reductions to tax increases (totalling approximately \$1.5 billion of the \$2.3 billion to be removed from the projected deficit for 1986-87), the 26 February 1986 budget continued to feature commitments to restraint. It was announced, however, that the implementation of budgetary commitments would involve reductions to program funding and transfers, rather than cuts in public service personnel additional to the 5,491 positions to be eliminated in 1986-1987, on the basis of earlier budgetary announcements.

The 1986-87 Main Estimates, tabled in the House on 27 February 1986, revealed the distribution of the first round of person-year reductions proposed in the 1985 budget. Major reductions, by department, were: 296 (Energy, Mines and Resources); 374 (Indian Affairs and Northern Development); 376 (Agriculture); 393 (Health and Welfare); 455 (Supply and Services); 549 (Public Works); 623 (Transport); 1,062 (Defence - civilian employees); and 1,823 (all others). A net reduction of of 5,491 was achieved.

3. The Release of the Nielsen Findings

On 11 March 1986, following reports in the media of controversy within the Cabinet about their release, 19 task force studies (as well as an overview volume and a supplementary study on regulatory reform) were tabled in the House. While it was emphasized that they did not constitute government policy, the reports attracted widespread media and public attention both as glimpses of probable policy and as potential exposés of bureaucratic waste. Within the House, opposition parties focused more critically on their use as decision-making tools prior to examination by Parliament.

While the scope and diversity of the task force reports preclude their detailed analysis here, the following broad conclusions may be offered. The task force concept itself seems to have proven its usefulness. Distinctive features of its approach were (a) that it was a one-time exercise subject neither to the compromises involved in intra-bureaucratic control processes nor to bureaucratic tendencies towards entrenchment and growth; and (b) that it relied on people from outside the programs reviewed, and frequently from outside government.

While characteristics of the task force appear to have fostered the development of innovative approaches to many of the programs considered, they do not fully exempt the Nielsen review from certain longstanding problems of bureaucratic control. Reliance on outsiders was qualified by the need for appropriate expertise, which in some cases meant staffing review teams with people from within relatively small departments whose programs were under review. In such cases the fact that reviewers and managers of programs under review might share a corporate culture, or have working or personal relationships, could easily have dulled the rigour of the review.

Furthermore, it would be remarkable if at least some participating officials, particularly those frustrated by present limitations on advancement within the public service, had not viewed their work on the task force as a way to make contacts and "open doors". This motivation might be associated with a tendency to advocate, at most, cautious innovations within existing programs.

Reviews of, in some cases, very extensive government programs by small groups limited to three month work periods would be likely to face problems in merely processing the volume of information, and in preventing it from overwhelming their ability to pursue the critical questions. Reviewers, in these circumstances, were also likely to depend heavily on the assistance of officials involved in the programs under review.

Some program reviews may illustrate general problems just raised. The media have recorded complaints by some program officials about excessively brief on-site visits and superficial investigations. Some

program reviews, furthermore, provide detailed program descriptions accompanied by only cursory analytical comments which do not address the fundamental 'why is this here?' questions implicit in the task force mandate. It should be noted, however, that even the excessively descriptive portions of the review furnish decision-makers, both within the government and within the parliamentary committees to which the reports have been referred, with a uniquely comprehensive body of information on which to base further analysis.

As of 23 June 1986, approximately three months after the Task Force reports had been referred to standing committees of the House, fewer than half of the reports had been examined. The apparent bogging down of the committee examination process was attributed by some to confusion arising from the structure of the review, which resulted in reports crossing departmental and hence committee jurisdictions, and to heavy committee workloads. The reports continued to receive only limited attention from committees after the commencement of the new session of Parliament on 30 September 1986, and ceased to attract significant media or public attention.

4. Budgetary Restraint (September 1986 - November 1988)

a. The 18 September 1986 Economic Statement

The economic update statement delivered by Finance Minister Wilson at the Canadian Club in Toronto on 18 September 1986, like the Throne Speech of 1 October 1986, contained no mention of new public service restraint measures. It thus appeared likely that the public service cuts scheduled in the May 1985 budget would continue to be the major basis for public service restraint.

b. The February 1987 Budget and the 1987-88 Estimates

The approach to public service restraint apparent in the economic update statement was also evident in the 18 February 1987 budget. This combined modest spending cuts with increased or extended taxes to hold the projected deficit to \$29.3 billion for 1987-88.

The emphasis, as far as public service restraint is concerned, on adhering to cutbacks scheduled in 1985 was further apparent with the release of the 1987-88 Main Estimates on 2 March 1987. These provided for a net reduction of 3,072 person-years (or 1.2% of the public service establishment, slightly more than the 1% scheduled in 1985). This was after allowing for increases of 403 person-years at Revenue Canada (Taxation), 247 at Employment and Immigration (including the Immigration Appeal Board), 95 for the creation of an Office of Privatization and Regulatory Affairs, and 412 elsewhere in the system. Major reductions were scheduled for Indian Affairs and Northern Development (508); National Defence (499); Supply and Services (345, of which 97 will be transferred to the Canadian Commercial Corporation, outside the public service); Revenue Canada (Customs and Excise) (307); Health and Welfare (300); Agriculture (274); Transport (259); and Energy, Mines and Resources (257); with reductions of 1,480 person-years to be made elsewhere in the system.

The Estimates also made provision for the funding of a novel inducement to managerial efficiency: bonuses of between 1% and 1.5% of salary will be paid to senior managers who meet expenditure reduction targets, along with other objectives. The estimated cost was \$4.5 million.

c. The February 1988 Budget and the 1988-1989 Estimates

The 10 February budget maintained the approach to public service restraint evident in the 1986 and 1987 budgets. Adherence to the cutbacks scheduled in 1985, it was claimed, would contribute to a projected reduction of the 1988-1989 deficit to \$28.9 billion (from an estimated \$29.3 billion for 1987-1988) and the budget announced no additional public service cutbacks.

Continuing adherence to the 1985 cutback schedule was apparent, as well, in the 1988-1989 Main Estimates, tabled in the House on 23 February. These provided for a net reduction of 1,961 person-years, or 0.8% of the public service establishment, during 1988-1989. The 1988-1989 reductions fell short of the 1% annual reduction target set out in 1985 by an amount roughly equal to that by which it was exceeded in 1986-1987, thus keeping the 1985 downsizing program on track.

Major person-year increases were scheduled for Public Works (750, reflecting the transfer of architectural and engineering services from other departments); the establishment of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Western Diversification Office (507); Communications (154) and Energy, Mines and Resources (109). Major reductions were scheduled for Indian Affairs and Northern Development (737), Transport (623), Defence (442), Regional Industrial Expansion (428), Environment (320), Correctional Service (277), Employment and Immigration (243) and Health and Welfare (232).

C. The Mulroney Government of 1988

While deficit reduction remained a major challenge as the Conservatives returned to power in 1988, there were few signs either during the election campaign or in its aftermath that attempts to meet this challenge would involve public service cutbacks additional to those announced in 1985.

1. The April 1989 Budget and the 1989-1990 Estimates

The 27 April 1989 budget proposed spending reductions, but no public service cutbacks additional to those required by the 1985 downsizing schedule. The 1989-1990 Main Estimates, tabled in the House on 28 April, provided for a net reduction of 1,072 person-years, or 0.5% of the public service establishment. This reduction, while falling short of the 1% annual reduction target set out in 1985 will reduce the size of the public service to 1973 levels.

Major person-year increases are scheduled for Employment and Immigration (416, reflecting the enhancement of the refugee determination process); the establishment of the new Immigration and Refugee Board (264); Taxation (226); Customs and Excise (123) and Western Economic Diversification (120). Major reductions are scheduled for National Defence (482); Indian and Northern Development (414); Transport (285); Public Works (245); Agriculture and Forestry (150); Regional Industrial Expansion (now Industry, Science and Technology Canada) (134); National Transportation Agency (133); Supply and Services (128); and Statistics Canada (121).

2. The February 1990 Budget and the 1990-91 Estimates

The 20 February 1990 budget maintained the focus on spending cuts and deficit reduction apparent in recent budgets, but proposed no public service cutbacks additional to those related to the 1985 downsizing schedule.

The 1990-91 Main Estimates, tabled in the House on 22 February, provided for a net reduction of 781 person-years, or 0.34% of the public service establishment. While this figure falls short of the 1% annual reduction target set out in 1985, and well short of the 1.49% net reduction needed to meet the 5-year reduction target of 15,000 person-years established at that time, it reduces public service person-years to the lowest level in 17 years.

Major person-year increases are scheduled for Taxation (1,027); Customs and Excise (168); the Department of Industry, Science and Technology (165); the Correctional Service (122) and the Department of the Environment (67); along with 300 person-years for the establishment of the Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation Safety Board and 155 for the establishment of the Canadian Space Agency. Major reductions are scheduled for Public Works (503); Energy, Mines and Resources (378); Transport (363); National Health and Welfare (266); Employment and Immigration Department/Commission (199); National Defence (195); and Supply and Services (177).

Actual lay-offs from the workforce adjustment program have been restricted to about 1,000 (as of February 1990), indicating the success of the program in relying on attrition.

D. Issue Status

The moderation of the size and costs of government has emerged as a continuing governmental objective since September 1984. While unanticipated conditions in sectors such as energy and agriculture have presented difficulties in the attainment of significant deficit reduction, a reversal of the longstanding trend of public service growth has been achieved.

Fiscal year 1990-1991 brings the 1985 workforce reduction program to a conclusion. While intensifying fiscal pressures on the government are likely to foster continuing restraint within the public service, Senior Treasury Board officials indicated, following the release of the Estimates, that small but steady growth can be expected to resume in 1991.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

The Economic Statement presented to the House on 8 November 1984 by Finance Minister Michael Wilson proposed wide-ranging spending cuts which would ultimately eliminate 3,600 public service positions.

The Main Estimates (1985-86) were tabled in the House on 26 February 1985. They held the net increase in public service person-years to 1,209 and were concurred with by the House on 13 June 1985.

The May 1985 budget, presented to the House on the 23rd of that month, proposed the reduction of federal government person-years by 2% (or 5,000) in 1986-1987, and by 1% each year until 1990-91, for a total reduction of 15,000. The budget was approved by the House on 3 June 1985.

The February 1986 budget, presented to the House on the 26th of that month, proposed a special reduction on non-statutory spending of \$500 million for 1986-1987 and projected savings of \$350 million from productivity improvements. It was approved by the House on 7 March 1986.

On 27 February 1986, the Main Estimates, providing for net reductions in the level of authorized person-years totalling 5,491, were tabled in the House. The House concurred with the Estimates on 10 June 1986.

On 11 March 1986, the findings of the Task Force on Program Review were tabled in the House by Deputy Prime Minister Erik Nielsen, and referred to standing committees for detailed study.

The budget presented to the House on 18 February 1987 proposed the deferral of \$200 million in defence spending, and savings of \$150 million in foreign aid and \$250 million from reduced reserves, in

order to achieve a projected 1987-88 deficit of \$29.3 billion. The budget was approved by the House on 13 April 1987.

On 2 March 1987, the Main Estimates, providing for net person-year reductions of 3,072, were tabled in the House. The House concurred with the Estimates on 11 June 1987.

The budget presented to the House on 10 February 1988 provided for continuing deficit reduction without more public service cutbacks than already scheduled. It was approved by the House on 29 February 1988.

On 23 February 1988, the 1988-1989 Main Estimates, providing for net person-year reductions of 1,961, were tabled in the House. The House concurred with the Estimates on 27 June 1988.

The budget presented to the House on 27 April 1989 provided for significant spending reductions and tax increases, but added no public service cutbacks to those already scheduled. It was approved by the House on 15 May 1989.

On 28 April 1989, the 1989-1990 Main Estimates, providing for net person-year reductions of 1,072, were tabled in the House.

The budget presented to the House on 20 February 1990 provided for significant spending reductions, but added no public service cutbacks to those already scheduled. It was approved by the House on 8 March 1990.

On 22 February 1990, the 1990-91 Main Estimates, providing for net person-year reductions of 781, were tabled in the House.

CHRONOLOGY

18 September 1984 - The Ministerial Task Force on Program Review, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Erik Nielsen, was established to develop proposals to make government programs "simpler, more understandable and more accessible to their clientele."

8 November 1984 - The Economic Statement was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).

- 26 February 1985 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 23 May 1985 - The first formal budget of the Mulroney government was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 26 February 1986 - The budget was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 27 February 1986 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 11 March 1986 - The Nielsen task force findings were tabled in the House.
- 18 February 1987 - The budget was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 2 March 1987 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 30 April 1987 - Treasury Board President Robert de Cotret's report on the impact of the government's person-year reduction program was tabled in the House. It revealed that initial objectives had been achieved.
- 10 February 1988 - The budget was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 23 February 1988 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 21 November 1988 - Following a campaign in which no party proposed new public service restraint initiatives, the Conservative party was re-elected to power.
- 27 April 1989 - The budget was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 28 April 1989 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 20 February 1990 - The budget was presented to the House (see Parliamentary Action).
- 22 February 1990 - The Main Estimates were tabled in the House (see Parliamentary Action).

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